The French Spy and the Tailgunner from Paso Robes

It's lonely at 20,000 feet. It's also cold and can be extremely bumpy, depending on the weather. There are no heaters nor is the plane pressurized because this is a World War II B-17 bomber on a secret mission.

Near its target it descends. The gunners look out into the darkness, seeking that tell-tale exhaust from a German night fighter.

As the plane nears Paris it is low enough that it can deliver its special package. But it wasn't to be that night. Despite the incredible danger everyone on that plane faced, the mission was suddenly aborted.

High above Paris, Harold "Army" Armstrong looks back from his tail gunner position, although aborted, another secret mission is done and, once his 30 missions are over, he can come home to Paso Robles.

While Armstrong commented only on the one secret mission, where, on April 4, 1943, dropping Gerrie was aborted via special code, the playing of the Warsaw Concerto over the BBC, he never mentioned the other still secret missions. For Armstrong it would be over 45 missions with the extra flights never being recorded in his official record.

Strangely enough that little package he attempted to deliver to France also came to live in Paso Robles — and while both lived in Paso Robles, they never met again.

Upon his death, his daughter, Rebecca, found a newspaper article about Rolande "Frenchie" Amundson in her father's personal effects — Frenchie was Gerrie and until her story ran in the local newspaper, he never knew that she had been captured and tortured by the Germans and, after a number of tragedies in her life after the war, she came here and was adopted by the Army at Camp Roberts.

"Frenchie was French. She was born in Paris," said Joan Hussey of the Camp Roberts Museum. "When she was a teenager she wanted to become a nurse so she went to one of the schools in Paris to become a nurse. So when the Nazis came and told her she had to leave, she had to go home and all the men in her class were sent to a labor camp.

"She got very angry about this, so she decided to go and work for the French Resistance. Since she spoke two or three languages, they wondered if she would make a good spy. She said she'd do it so they taught her how to be a spy and how to jump out of airplanes.

"They sent her back to France to work with the Germans. So she parachuted out over France and went to work for the Germans," Hussey said.

Frenchie was assigned as a storekeeper in a German food distribution center. That allowed her to find how much and where food was being spent, vital information for the Allies in tracking German units.

"They brought her back to England twice and on the third time being sent back to France the French Vichie caught her," Hussey explained. "They tortured her pretty bad to find out information, which she didn't know. All she knew is

what she had done. So they turned her over to the Nazis and they put her into a concentration camp. I guess they did other horrible things to that poor dear.

"But she lived through it. At the end of the war, when the Americans came and liberated the concentration camp at Munchousen. She went back to Paris and eventually married a French pilot. They had a little boy and he was ordered to go to Indo China (Vietnam) where she worked in one of the hospitals. I understand she came home one day and found her house bombed and her little boy killed," Hussey explained.

"Two or three days later her husband was shot down and killed. So she went back to Paris and began working for the Americans and eventually married an American soldier," she noted. "They came back to America and to this area to work for the SATCOM station (at Camp Roberts).

"She did all kinds of volunteer work, a lot of everything for everybody, it didn't make any difference if it was military or civilian," Hussey explained.

Then one day, after a chance remark, a spy came out of the cold, so to speak.

According to Hussey, Frenchie was at a "Paso Robles Airport Day"

watching U.S. Army Special Forces parachutists in action. "Oh, I've done that," she said to one of the soldiers.

"The guy looks at her and said 'how did you ever do anything like that?' So she told him her story. They didn't really believe her. Here's a little old lady making all kinds of noises here, so they checked up on her and found out what her code name was," said Hussey.

Hussey said that when the story checked out, the Special Forces made Frenchie a Lieutenant Colonel and she became a member of the California State Militia. "They did make her an honorary officer," said Hussey. "She met a lot of big wig people."

A lot of people in Paso Robles recall Army Armstrong, winner of the Distinguished Flying Cross and survivor of a number of "reconnaissance" flights over occupied territory, and many people remember Frenchie, who died in 1997, but few know that on a cold night over France, with flack flying up at them, two people from two different countries would make a brief contact and then, years later, end up living in the same town thousands of miles away from where they shared fear and bravery.

Rolande "Frenchie" Amundson, also known as Agent Gerrie, as a young woman in France.

When Harold "Army" Armstrong died, his daughter found a newspaper story about a Paso Robles resident who had spied against the Germans in World War II. At the top of the article, Armstrong wrote, "Flew her and group to France. Did not drop. Code Abort. Night mission. Warsaw Concerto, BBC radio."

Frenchie with Martha (Maggie) Ray. The two ladies were both made honorary LTC in the U.S. Army, Ray for her years of supporting the troops during World War II, Korea and Vietnam, and Frenchie for her courage behind German lines during World War II.

Lt. Col. Bruce Gomez, Commander, Camp Roberts Mobilization Battalion, presented a Certificate of Appreciation to Marty Compston, Manager, Paso Robles Albertson's, as other store employees look on. Albertson's was recognized for their assistance in helping to provide a BBQ "welcome home" dinner to soldiers who recently returned from duty in the Persian Gulf area and demobilized at nearby Camp Roberts.
Photo by Staff Sgt. Tom Murotake, Camp Roberts Public Affairs Office